

# Sharing Stories, Sharing Cultures

## Towards the Equitable Exchange of Children's Stories

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### Motivation to Begin a Story Exchange

"Hello, Mister. How are you? Give me money!" was the greeting I often received from the young children who saw me walking down the roads of Lilongwe, Malawi.

"It is time for school. You need to be in school." was always my reply.

Some days I would count 20 to 25 children out playing during school hours, yet, I understood why they were not in school. Some families depended upon the older children to care for the younger ones while a parent or caregiver worked. Other times, the children were forced to work in order to make enough money for the family to survive (Mulama, 2005).

In Malawi, education is not always a top priority. Although there has been free primary education since 1994, attendance in school is not compulsory (Ngozo, 2010). Even when children do go to school, schools can be overcrowded with few books for students to use. Classrooms can hold over 100 children with whole groups of children sharing one textbook. Try as they do, teachers are sometimes unable to meet the needs of all the children in their classes (Chimombo, 2005). In light of issues of poverty, it is not difficult to understand why some parents and caregivers do not value education.

The hope of better education motivates many in Malawi to carve paths of opportunities for vulnerable children. On my first visit to Malawi when I was assisting a Malawian nongovernmental organization (NGO), I traveled to Kapenda in the northern area of the country with a Malawian national. He wanted to return

to his home village to bring some orphans and other vulnerable children to Lilongwe to be raised as a family.

Entering the village, I was overwhelmed at the number of children who wanted to have this opportunity for education and a home. Poverty's greatest impact was on the lives of the youngest members of society because they experienced the loss of parental care. The local community gathered in the darkness of a mud brick home to decide which orphans and other vulnerable children would have this opportunity. The village headman confirmed the decision, and we made our way by the light of the moon to the cornfield where the children gathered. They would travel with us the long way back to Lilongwe.

A little girl caught my attention in the light piercing forth from our van. With tears flowing from her red and swollen eyes, she begged us not to leave her behind. Her arms reached out to us as we drove past and back to the small hotel in Chitipa where we would spend the night. The business of settling the other children did not erase her from my thoughts. She was my last memory of the night and was still with me with the rising of the sun. "We cannot take them all. We will fail in our attempt to save some if we take too many children," came the wise counsel of my Malawian friend.

Although I understood the intent of his words, I could not forget the children we left behind. As a teacher from an affluent area of the world, I knew I must find a way to help these two vastly different worlds connect. Giving money or supplies would be the automatic response, but the paternalistic giving of material possessions creates a hierarchy that places the Western child on a higher plane and the Malawian as simply a receiver of benevolence. When schools have clothing drives or raise money for specific causes, it is usually the parent who gives the money or materials. Chil-

dren may have some connection with this giving, but they are usually not connected in a personal way. This type of relationship would not honor the beauty I saw in the lives of the people I had come to love.

Having spent many years living and working outside of the United States, I knew the quality of a person's life could not be measured by their income and possessions. I have seen great beauty in the relationships that are built among extended families in places where financial income is at a minimal. The friendliness and warmth of many of these cultures is a sharp contrast to the evidence of diminishing community connections back in my own country. Thus, I wanted to avoid a hierarchy in giving between children from a wealthy culture to those with limited financial resources. Although it would be difficult to attain, it was important for these groups of children to learn from each other. While pondering this dilemma, I recalled the beauty of the children's stories I have heard from both sides of the ocean.

Children tell stories that are uniquely personal yet are wrapped in their cultural understanding. Gathering these stories and sharing them with other children around the world has the potential to encourage children to continue telling stories as they further develop their own literacy skills. In addition, an exchange of stories would help young people gain an insight into cultures vastly different from yet also similar to their own.

### The Process: Beginning in a U.S. School

The process began in a public elementary school in Atlanta, Georgia. The population of this school was predominantly White and affluent. Most of the parents were highly educated; many were well traveled. When presented with the idea to

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write stories for kids in Malawi, students were excited about communicating with children in another country and began to advertise the opportunity throughout the school. Some classes took time to write stories during the school day. Other classes had students write at home. The children were excited to write with a purpose. The idea that their stories would be read by an audience of children across the world motivated many of them to begin the process. As the children wrote, they worked hard to improve their own writing so the stories would be clear to others.

After the stories were collected, student and adult editors chose the stories that they felt would be of the most interest to other children across the world. The stories were typed into a template so all stories had the same formatting. To save time, an adult traced each author's illustrations onto the template. Once photocopied, the black and white books were put together into small themed readers with multiple stories in each.

The reading level of the stories was also a determining factor for placement. Using different colored file folders cut in half for covers, the story collections had a bit of color and definition. The collections included adventure stories, animal stories, fantasy stories, and humorous stories. In addition to the readers, about 15 fifth graders wrote and illustrated their own stories to send to young people in Malawi. Fifty copies of each book were made. The books were packed into my suitcase, and I was off to Malawi.

### **The Process: Sharing Stories in Malawi**

Although the Malawian customs officials were not quite sure what I was doing with so many homemade books, they waved me on and allowed me entrance without an additional charge. I began almost immediately sharing the books with the children in Lilongwe at the home of my Malawian friend. The children were amazed at the U.S. children's stories and illustrations. They had many questions about what it was like to live in the U.S. The humor included in the stories was not lost on the U.S. children's Malawian counterparts. Some explanations were needed, but generally the children thoroughly enjoyed each story.

Although the children enjoyed reading and rereading the American children's stories, getting them to write their own stories was difficult because they had never written a story before. They did not know where to start.

Knowing that story telling was an integral part of their culture, I asked the children to begin the process by telling me some stories. They told me stories they had heard before, but in time they started to make up sections of the stories for themselves. The children got so excited about telling stories that they told stories every time we were together.

To get the stories down on paper, I tried to encourage the children to draw picture of the stories to get their minds thinking. I bought assignment books and colored pencils at the neighborhood shop so the children could write and draw. Every little scrap of paper was precious. Since the children were not familiar with writing and drawing pictures, it took some time to get them started.

At the beginning, their stories were only a few sentences long, but in time they filled in more details and developed content that could truly entertain. Once stories were written, an audience was needed. The children loved reading their stories in front of each other. Not only this, but during my entire time in Malawi the children continued telling their stories whenever we were together.

The adults in charge of caring for the children thought I was wasting time by telling stories and drawing pictures. School lessons usually consisted only of memorizing facts and solving problems in assignment books. The fun of telling stories and drawing did not match anyone's understanding of proper schooling. Since I was from the U.S., the adults humored me and allowed me to continue in spite of their frustration that I was taking the children away from more important tasks.

Working with the children I already knew was exciting, but I also wanted to reach beyond this small group of young people. Most of the connections I had were with private organizations, yet I wanted to be sure to be connected to government agencies as well. I did not have a connection with a government school, so I gathered up my courage and went knocking on the gate of the local government primary school.

This school was set up with many different buildings. Each building held only two or three classrooms. Each classroom led outside to a dirt yard that was constantly being swept clean. The windows were screened but did not contain glass. The doors were made of bars so even when the door was closed, the wind, dust, and noise entered the rooms freely. Inside, the rooms were painted with chalkboard paint at student height with a larger chalkboard

section at the front for the teacher. Although the roof was tiled, I could see bits of the sky when I was inside. I wondered how much of the rain could get through. The school classrooms did not have working electricity. No lights, overhead projectors, or computers were present. Even the headmaster did not have access to a computer. The school did not have a library, playground, or cafeteria. The students did have a break time each day that was spent chasing each other or sitting up on the wall while eating their snack. School ran from 7:30 a.m. until 1:00 p.m.

Because I did not have a connection with this government school, I decided that it would be better if I asked permission to observe in the school for a week. I sat in the classes and watched the teachers teach from standard one through standard eight. It was amazing to see the differences between our schools in the U.S. and this Malawian government school. The children had little in the way of materials or books. And the classes were as large as 125 in one classroom with one teacher. I was amazed as I watched these teachers expertly control these classes and teach the children without books.

Evidence of teaching strategies borrowed from high-income countries provided little support for the situations these teachers faced (Lewin & Stuart, 2003). Many of the teachers wrote everything on the chalkboard and the children had to copy it into their assignment books. At the end of class, the teachers had to correct all of the books from the children who had brought them. Near the end of the week, the teachers asked me if I would like to teach a lesson in a third grade classroom.

The challenge of keeping 60 to 100 students engaged in the lesson was difficult. I succeeded only because the children were so curious about the idea of a strange White woman in the front of the classroom. Teaching my one little lesson gave me even greater respect for the abilities the Malawian teachers faced each day. Daily, I observed effective teaching techniques by caring teachers, but the lack of books and materials made the situation nearly impossible to move all of the students forward in their learning (Chimombo, 2005).

I was in a quandary as to how I could encourage the students at the government school to actually write stories and share the ones I had brought. The most appropriate thing to do was to give the books to the head teacher and allow the school to determine what they would do with them. I wanted the books to go specifically to individual children, but with so many children

and so few materials there was no way to meet the need.

The headmaster decided that the books would go in the school's library. The school really did not have a library. What served as a "library" was a locked shelf in the headmaster's office. This was difficult for me to face because I wanted the children to have their own books, but I was a guest and was obligated to submit my will to that of those in charge. The school officials understood what was best for their students, and I needed to trust them. I let go of the control of our little books.

With all of the books delivered, I was then faced with the task of encouraging the children to write their own stories. To accomplish this, I had to be creative. I wanted to encourage writing, but I knew there was no writing process going on at the school. So I asked the headmaster if it might be possible to conduct a writing contest, and he agreed. I had to work hard to get the teachers and administrators interested in conducting a writing contest. It was an added burden, and they already had an impossible job of trying to educate so many children with few materials.

Lessons are taught in English and Chichewa, the national language, in government schools. Although the students in standards 4 to 8 have their lessons in English, the headmaster worried that the students might not be able to write stories in English. I assured him that it didn't matter if the stories were in Chichewa or English. It was important to get the students writing. I would accept either.

Since there was no time for the writing during the school day, the stories were written outside of class and submitted to the teachers. The teachers at the government school did the judging of the stories. Of the 30 submissions from the school of 1,000 students, 20 of the children received prizes. The prizes were exercise books, pens, and what I had hoped would be individual books for each child; but again these books were placed in the school library instead of given to individual children. This continued to emphasize to me the need for children to have reading materials and provided me the motivation to continue this "paraschool" project.

### **The Process Continues: Writers' Studio**

Upon returning to the United States, I typed the stories from the children in Malawi and shared them with students in the public school in Atlanta. The U.S.

students were surprised by the stories. Concepts such as farming, poverty, lack of food, death of parents, and AIDS confused them. They wanted to know more about the place where the young authors lived.

Because the Atlanta school had two teachers from Bamako, Mali, visiting for six weeks, the students were able to ask some quality questions about the differences between their own lives and the lives of children in sub-Saharan Africa. Rich conversations developed. Curious students came away from the discussions with more questions than answers. This indicated a growing open-mindedness toward children's lives in sub-Saharan Africa.

Finding quality time within the school day to write stories proved to be as difficult for the teachers in the U.S. school as it was in the Malawian school. When writing projects were assigned, students did not always have the freedom to express their unique thoughts and perspectives because assignments were required to fit into specific grading rubrics. Thus, an after-school Writers' Workshop developed for students from second grade through fifth grade.

The purpose of the workshop was to give the students the freedom to explore storytelling in their own unique ways. Because of the number of students wanting to attend, the sessions eventually had to be broken down by grade levels; however, the students enjoyed the multi-aged sessions the most. Older students had a chance to take the younger students under their wings to support as well as to enjoy the playfulness of their writing and illustrations. Younger students valued the time and ideas they collected from their more mature friends.

Unexpectedly, the boys thoroughly enjoyed the freedom of expression allowed at the Writers' Workshop. They did not need to hold back their radical writing topics that were not always acceptable in the regular classroom. Boys' writing often contained action-oriented themes filled with dramatic suspense, violence, and slapstick comedy that was not always allowed in school (Williams, 2004). Because a few popular boys enjoyed this, others quickly joined in as well.

A third grade student, struggling with personal issues at home, opened up and shared her problems through her writing. The process of writing about a make-believe little girl with the same types of problems gave her an opportunity to explore the issues with the help of a teacher and find solutions that she could not grasp by herself.

Teachers allowed the students to explore writing and story telling in their own

way. Suggestions and ideas were given only when individual students asked. Teachers were also involved with the writing process themselves as they modeled the enjoyment of writing. As the development of the story writing in the U.S. school grew, so did the need to carry this process to other schools.

A blog about the story exchange attracted teachers from other places including a teacher from an international school in Tokyo, Japan. She sent stories from children there to join in with our experiment. In addition to Malawi, stories were taken to a school in Bamako, Mali. Thus, the project continued to grow.

While walking through the streets of Timbuktu, Mali, a girl about nine years old approached me. "Give me that," she demanded as she pointed to a book I had in my hand. I did not have an original collection of children's stories in my hand. The book I held had no value for her, but this was a powerful reminder that books and stories hold importance to children. Whether the children have a full bookshelf of books or have yet to own their own book, stories have power.

A story from Malawi or Mali may contain different concepts and themes than a story from Atlanta, Georgia—but it holds the same story elements and opportunities for personal growth. The similarities and differences between the stories provide a study of cultures from an equitable vantage point. Children's original stories have the potential to improve literacy skills and spark an examination of cultures from across the world as children share as equals.

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